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A Five Weeks Introduction to Democracy

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"The rains of August seem to have doused the fires of May whose ashes had been left to the street cleaners. The streets, and then the walls of the emptied Paris have been cleaned. This cleansing has also washed the brains and erased the memories. As a wave washes over a sandy beach, the great silence of midsummer has passed over the many speeches and protests of spring. Here we are again in the situation that the *after* recommences the *before*"[1], this is how Michel de Certeau describes the calm that followed the May 1968 events in Paris. It is as if the interweaving of political and cosmological temporality had always seemed natural: the spring of unrest, the summer of revisionism and tourism... and the autumn of oblivion. But that description can be applied to the period that follows any generic political moment, regardless of the time of year it occurs in. The moment is threatened by its very tentativeness and temporality. As well as by its novelty, unexpectedness and innovativeness that introduce a gap in the order of things. In other words, the absence of the real place and real time of politics as such. But also of a real name. Hence the inability to give a name to

such events, except according to the year in which they occurred, such as *1968*.

All this speaks of heterology or heterotopy as the necessary basic condition for politics in the true sense of the word. In his analysis of 1968, De Certeau speaks of an "island" that suddenly appeared on the map which until then had firmly established political and ideological boundaries. Similar, previously unidentified political space suddenly appeared at the end of April in Croatia and, for over a month, shook the domestic political stage. Everything happened very fast: a smaller group of students decided on Monday, April 20th, to occupy the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb[2], demanding education free of charge for all, at all levels of education. At noon they took control over the Faculty entrance hall, read their declaration in front of the media, and started a procession which went around the building stopping classes in every lecture hall. All those who were confused and uninformed could find answers in the publication named *Skripta*, in which the newly formed *Independent Student Initiative for the Right to Free Education* explained in detail their demands, the aims of their action as well as the instruments of achieving it.

That is how the initial moment, set off by a very small group of people[3], looked like, but the fact that the chosen moment of action was ripe for success can be seen from the way a multitude of students instantly supported the action. Several days later, students in Zadar started the occupation of their University, and after only a week about twenty faculties and universities in the country were occupied. By then excellently organized students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences sent delegates all over Croatia to help students in Osijek, Rijeka and Split to improve organization and establish plenums – open assemblies of students and citizens

who would every evening, following a public discussion, together decide whether to continue the action and in what ways to do so.

However, the occupied faculties were not only places of political discussions. Instead of the regular classes and exams, the students organized an alternative educational programme: it featured numerous round tables on the topic of commercialization of education, soon professors from Ljubljana began arriving to hold lectures on similar subjects, and the range of topics was widened to include discussions on the corruption in the media, the disappearance of the welfare state, the strategies of neoliberal politics and so on. Hence the occupied faculties were not only divested of their usual purpose of hierarchical transferral of knowledge, but were given a completely new purpose: they became unconquerable "islands" of most vehement social criticism, welcoming anyone interested in radical social change.

The media's initial assumption was that these were merely student spring rituals, as innocent as those of the previous years when the students protested low-quality food in student restaurants. However, the daily press conferences at the occupied faculties showed a greater degree of organization that did not allow room for dealing with commonplace issues. In addition, the students were unwilling to provide the media with what it wanted so much: new heroes in the form of student leaders. The students changed spokespersons every day so none of the faces was given room to stand out. The media also had limited access to the occupied faculties and was barred from recording the plenary sessions held every evening. Realizing they were not in control of the situation, a large part of the media simply sided with the students, until TV and newspaper editors began receiving orders from high up in the government.

Both the government and academia refrained from responding to the situation for nearly a week, believing the student action will be short-lived. The initial responses were, of course, condemning and threatening, which in fact had the effect of additionally encouraging the students. The second round of authorities' responses was far softer: the head of the University of Zagreb humbly came to the student plenum, sat on the floor instead of trying to find an empty seat and waited patiently for his turn to speak. Several days later, the Minister of Education joined the protesters in chanting "Resign! Resign!" to himself. While everyone at the time saw it as a paradox and laughed at him, the recent headlines suggest something different: that the minister was more of a prophet than a baffled politician as he is indeed facing a resignation.

However, the changes in the media's and government's reactions were predictable. The students' media strategy prevented the media instrumentalization of the movement, either by the opposition political parties or other interested parties (such as certain unions). The academic and government authorities could employ only two approaches: either being a strict or a soft (and hypocritical) parent. In both cases the students responded by distancing themselves and repeatedly directing their demands at the highest legislative bodies and the public. It was therefore necessary to win the fight on "neutral" grounds: in the public opinion.

But a country in which the left has been eradicated long ago and whose public sphere is governed by a strong alliance of nationalism and neoliberalism, can promise nothing but a difficult battle in the trenches with high chances of failure. We are talking about doubly territorialized space: on the one hand there is the hegemony of techno-management discourse according to which the legacy of the welfare state is a big problem and which always finds that the cure

for the "sick body of society" is economic therapy, and on the other is the basic ideological foundation on which the Habermasian and Arendtian academic strongholds operate vigilantly creating democratic norms and watching out for any possible excess which could lead to totalitarianism. The student movement, of course, was faced with both of these obstacles. According to the prominent guard dogs of this system, the students at first were not "articulate" enough, that is, they couldn't speak the language of reality, the language of real social problems; whereas later their methods were condemned as "undemocratic", "communist", similar to those of the "sixty-eighters" etc. Those were simultaneously the two major arguments against the students and their struggle.

It might still be too early to assess the result of that struggle, although, after five weeks, the students voted at the plenum to temporarily end the occupation of the faculty in order to be able to finish the academic year. But the joint plenary sessions of students and citizens are continuing and already plans for autumn are being made. At the same time, public polemics, discussions, the war of interpretations rages on. Many positions have been defined in the meantime, and the discouraged and scattered critical intellectual powers accepted the war. At the very least, it became obvious that the territory of public opinion is not as invulnerable as was thought. If not even the system's guard dogs were able to hide their anxiety, than those five weeks were certainly not for nothing. The anxiety is the inverted form of double acknowledgement: that the "brats" certainly are "articulated" and that their speech, or "articulation", truly possesses the power to break with the dominant idea of politics.

This does not mean we are close to the goal, to the passing of the law that would guarantee free education for all and at all levels, but after five weeks of joint action and unexpected political

breakthrough we can start adding up a number of positive influences: the emergence of a new political subject which before then had been hidden among several social categories and names without encompassing any of them separately (student, citizen, worker etc), modified political topology (faculties as autonomous political zones), new forms of joint decision making (plenums), etc. These are all elements on which we can start building new frameworks of politics. Maybe that will be the reason that this year precisely, 2009, just like 1968, will someday be recognized as the year that gave another meaning to the word "democracy" in Croatia.

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[1] Michel de Certeau, *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques*, Seuil, 1994, p. 29

[2] The largest faculty at the University of Zagreb, with over 6,000 students. It includes the majority of humanistic and social sciences.

[3] Those were mostly the regular participants of a reading circle which took place once a week and which was envisaged as a place where contemporary left political theory would be read. That reading circle may have been the only place where people gathered and discussed radical politics in Croatia.